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ABSTRACT

An examination of the film, "Educating Rita," explores the effects of power respective to particular gender categories and suggests ways that the film becomes a case study in gender and education. The film is about a woman, Rita, who wants the ability to have choices in her life, pursues an education as the key to providing choices, and develops a relationship with a male professor, Frank. Several questions present invitations to look beneath the surface of the text of the film to the nature of gendered roles in the movie, the effects of relations of power, and how those roles and effects of power tend to impact both Rita's and Frank's struggle for voice. The representations of literature in the film make a strong connection to masculine authoritative words and suggest the interrogation of voice with respect to gender. The authoritative language and the lived experiences of the characters in the film seem related inextricably to the struggle for voice and to the historic way that women's voices and knowledge have been positioned as other than authoritative. Includes end notes. (CK)

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Gender and Education: Educating Rita[1] and the Struggle for Voice

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Educating Rita may be seen as the story of Dr. Frank Bryant's emotional and intellectual break and recovery.[2] Or it may be seen as the story of Rita's struggle to "sing a new song," to "discover what's inside," to "choose" and to have the right to do so.[3] It may be a story of the struggle for voice and the mechanisms of power that would prevent the voicings of women and "lesser known English poets" who strive for legitimacy. As a story of women's struggles for voice, it is every woman's story. Mikhail Bakhtin locates this struggle in the "dialogic interrelationship of [powerful/powerless] categories of ideological discourse -- what usually determines the history of an individual ideological consciousness (read as voice/identity)."[4] As a story of privilege in social institutions of higher learning, where polarized categories of discourse are reproduced in and through the academy's demand for the "production of truth," it is the story of every student's and every teacher's "position of simultaneously undergoing [the effects of power] and exercising this power."[5]

A brief synopsis of the film may not reveal the complexities of the nature of power and knowledge and its effects in the lives of women and other individuals. Yet a close examination of the film that interrogates the effects of power respective to particular discursive acts within particular gendered categories -- e.g., Rita's struggle for voice, for intellectual legitimacy -- may suggest ways in which this film becomes a case study in gender and education.[6]

Educating Rita opens as Dr. Frank Bryant walks to his office, finds his liquor bottle behind Charles Jackson's The Lost Weekend, and pours himself a

drink before teaching class. As Bryant stares out the window of the classroom, a young woman asks about the metaphysical nature of Blake's poetry and Bryant calls Blake a "dead poet." This comment raises ire in another student who contends Blake can hardly be called a dead poet. After a brief back and forth ridiculing by both student and teacher, the student asks Bryant if he's drunk and walks out of class.

After class Frank returns to his office to meet Rita, an enrollee in Open University. A hair dresser by day and student by night, Rita is eager to learn to read literature and write like other students. She tells Frank that her real name is Susan but she changed it to Rita after reading Rita Mae Brown's Ruby Fruit Jungle. Franks wants to know why she's come to him, and Rita replies, "I'm 26; I should have had a baby by now. Everyone expects it." But Rita wants to discover herself first.

Rita wants choices; she wants to cross boundaries or, at least, to dislocate them, and she believes education will provide those choices. For example, she wants a baby, but she secretly takes birth control pills so that she can have a baby when she decides -- "I told him I'd only have a baby when I got choice."

On one occasion, Frank invites Rita to join a few friends in his home and she accepts. But when the time comes to dress for the party, she tries on a variety of clothes, "looks" as she put it, and settles on something conservative. Rita walks reluctantly from the train station to Frank's house with umbrella and bottle of sparkling wine (leaving Denny, her husband, to entertain her parents at the local pub). When she arrives at Frank's, however, Rita decides she cannot go in and leaves a note instead. Rita

returns to the pub to join her family but finds she doesn't fit in there either.

When Frank asks Rita why she didn't come in, Rita asks why Frank invited her. He tells her she's funny, charming, delightful; he says because he wants to be with her. Rita hastily replies, "I don't want to be funny, charming, delightful; I want to be serious like the rest of you. . .You think we're all surviving with the spirit in tack." Then Rita recalls a sing along at the pub when she glances at her mother who has quit singing. When Rita's mother notices, she says, "There must be better songs to sing than this." Rita tells this recollection to Frank and says, "That's what I've come to do, sing a better song."

Denny doesn't like Rita going to school and blames school for her not getting pregnant. When he discovers birth control pills hidden in a compartment beneath the flooring and covered by a rug, Denny burns her books. Later after encouragement from Rita's father at a family wedding in which the bride is already four months pregnant, Denny issues an ultimatum -- get off the pill and quit school or get out. Rita, who can no longer settle for things as they are, says, "He's wondering where the girl he married is gone. He's right; she's gone and I've taken her place." (This new state of wide-awakeness or choosing to live deliberately may signal what might be referred to as Rita's feminist awakening. On the one hand, Rita is passionate about things that matter; on the other, we find her worried about learning social graces that will remove her uniqueness and make her like the status quo -- what Maxine Greene calls the "problematic application of gendered categories.[7])

Initially, Frank resists helping her become like everyone else -- students who parrot back information on tests, who don't think, and who have abandoned any originality in the course of trying to fit in. But when Rita finally crosses enough boundaries to fit in with some of the other students (writes a suitable McBeth paper or learns to write in a manner that will pass exams), Frank encourages her to go away to France for summer school with a group of students. When Rita returns, Frank greets her only to discover she is way ahead of him; she's read Blake and Rita is now Susan again having recognized the pretentiousness, she says, of taking on another name.

On the way to her next tutorial, Rita is stopped in the courtyard by Tison (nicknamed Tiger) and is asked to settle an argument. Frank sees this and becomes jealous, and in the traditional creator mode (and/or sour-grapes mode because now he has to share Rita), Frank takes credit for that too by confessing that he has created a Frankenstein - a thoughtless, culturally literate blend like "hollow men" and "dead poets." (Though the discourse in the film does not make clear the source of Frank's jealousy, much of the non-verbal language and several events -- alcoholic binges that follow particular interactions, for example -- suggests Frank's interest is more than intellectual and/or mentor related. These events and Frank's behavior announce yet another power differential operating in the film. Despite the fact that each learns from the other, control issues are nonetheless present.[8])

Rita gave up what Frank perceived to be her real life/her working class life, which to her was no life at all, for a life of what he called hollow, intellectual pursuit. This time Frank gets really drunk, goes to class and

makes fun of some of Rita's comments like "assonance is getting the rhyme wrong," falls down in class, and is called in by the bursar.

The movie continues on through several episodes of Frank's drunkenness and Trish, Rita's roommate's near suicide. He finds Rita or Susan in the bistro where she now works with Irish and asks her to critique his poetry. She does so according to what she's learned about literary criticism and tells Frank that the poetry is brilliant. He tells her it's garbage.

Rita takes her exam near the end of the movie. When she meets Frank in his office one last time and he gives her the news that she's passed with distinction, Rita comes clean about the trade-off involved in learning what she thought would be a "better song" -- that is, she seems to realize the degree to which she's privileged/valued without question a particular kind of knowledge over other knowledges. She explains that one of the questions on the exam dealt with the staging difficulties of Ibsen's Peer Gynt, a topic she'd written on previously. Frank asked her how she answered (alluding to her previous response), and Rita replied that she chose not to write "do it on the radio" as she'd done before. She said, "I had a choice; You've given me a choice."

Frank is packing books when Rita enters his office this last time, and he explains that he's been given a (mandatory) leave of absence to spend two years in Australia. He invites Rita to come along, and she replies simply, "I'll choose." The movie ends with Rita seeing Frank to his flight and waving good bye.

The following questions may be seen as invitations to dig deeper, beneath the surface of the text -- to make problematic the nature of gendered roles in the movie, the effects of relations of power, and how those roles and

the effects of power tend to impact both Rita's and Frank's struggle for voice.

1. In the film and in other settings, how have particular languages privileged some and marginalized others? If we perceive of language as a regulatory system, what groups tend to be most often marginalized? How is Rita marginalized? Frank? How might Frank's disregard for his own poetry suggest what he assumes about language and poetry? What does Rita's situation suggest about how the wider society views women and education when in some instances she is marginalized because she is taking classes and in other instances because she does not have a classical education? Who and what does it suggest is valued in the wider context? Why has the education of women historically been linked to moral decay, to the decline of traditional family values, and to the general degradation of society? How is this played out in the film?

2. How might dialogue disengage power and lead to understanding, cooperation, and accommodation that can sustain differences — i.e., how might Denny and Rita's relationship have been different had there been "real" dialogue across differences? In the movie and in the wider society, what might honoring voice and one's language have to do with mutual respect? And how can mutual respect challenge the effects of power in relationships, especially across gender lines?

3. How do unequal relationships and hierarchical structures in general tend to structure-in silence? How do they seem to determine who has the right to speak? Who feels safe to speak?

Who has the opportunity to speak? Whose ideas will be tolerated? Who has the right to know? Who has the right to question?

4. How might the absence of voices/choices tend to create a kind of social sterility? How might that be particularly problematic when those who are voiceless are most often women? How might Rita's challenge to the status quo of accepted/expected roles/positions question the authority of bureaucratic structures in the wider society? What are the contradictions implicit in Rita's questioning her gendered role/position but not questioning the authority of the texts she read? Why does that language seem beyond question? How are the issues of self-determined thinking/choice and voicing one's resistance connected in this film, especially in Rita's life?

5. How are the relations of power in the film between Rita and Denny, Rita and her father, Rita and Frank, and Frank and the bursar related to relations of power in the wider social context? How might these relations of difference become a particular form of social authority and control? In what ways do powerful arrangements tend to regulate gendered behavior? In what ways might Frank's behavior toward Rita have enacted another kind of power? In other words, it appears to Rita that Frank is "feed[ing her] without expecting anything in return." If this is true, why does Frank respond jealously and what might that jealousy suggest beyond romantic interests?

6. How might the rather monolithic discourse of the literature class serve society's standardization purposes (particularly in terms of the socialization of masculine and feminine gendered roles)? How can power result in a particular view of knowledge and history and in what ways

are women, in particular, affected by this? How can the literary canon, if posited as a "body of knowledge," be a means of promoting a gendered social order? How might the study of literature be a means of teaching us about the social construction of gender? If knowledge is power then whose knowledge equals power? Whose voice counts?

7. It has been said that those who are oppressed are often in compliance with their oppressor. How might Rita be seen in compliance with her oppressor? How can her role as returning female student be viewed as both resistant and compliant with a view of history that is interpreted through white male privilege? In what ways might Frank's role be said to perpetuate and/or contest that view? How might this movie be linked to a more historic cultural struggle?

The synopsis and questions here suggest a particular view of Educating Rita. However, it is by no means the only possible view. I suggest the interrogation of voice with respect to gender primarily because the representations of literature in this film make a strong connection to what Bakhtin refers to as the authoritative "words of the fathers."[9] These "words," this authoritative language, and the lived experiences of the characters in the film then seem inextricably related to the struggle for voice, for a say in something that counts, and to the historic way in which women's voices/knowledges/truths have been positioned as "other" than authoritative. In Educating Rita both the struggle for voice and the powerful/powerless dichotomy seem sharp. And the search for identity becomes a search for "what's inside" -- for a "better song."

Endnotes

1. Educating Rita, Lewis Gilbert, dir., with Michael Caine and Julie Walters (Hollywood: Columbia, 1984).

2. For a feminist reading of the concept of "break" as rupture or scission, see Julia Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, Margaret Waller, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 48-49. Kristeva's discussion describes the co-dependent relationship that establishes the "place of the Other" -- for example, the wife or mother and the demand made on her that eventually results in a break (physical, spiritual, emotional, etc). In the case of Educating Rita, Frank's inability to deal with loss of relationship converts to poetry writer's block and in turn to alcohol; each leads to a kind of father/lover like enclosure of Rita, his unsuspecting student, and announces a power struggle. Rita comes to Frank demanding to be taught, but he quickly begins to depend upon her in what may approximate the demand on mother or wife that leads to break. In Kristeva's words the break allows the signifier to produce signification -- Rita's refusal to be coddled both by Frank and Denny, her husband, creates a space for her own intellectual voicing or signification and likewise creates the space for Frank to rediscover his talent for writing poetry.

3. For a discussion of gender differences in the struggle to voice, see Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychology and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

4. Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, Michael Holquist, ed., Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 342.

5. Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977, Colin Gordon, ed., Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper, trans. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98.

6. For an excellent discussion of gender and education, see Madeleine Arnot, "Male Hegemony, Social Class, and Women's Education," Journal of Education 164 (1982): 1, 64-89.

7. For an excellent discussion of wide-awakeness or living deliberately and its relation to what Greene calls the "problematic application of gendered categories," see Maxine Greene, Landscapes of Learning (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), 219; see also Kate Chopin, The Awakening (New York: Churchill International Corporation, 1978).

8. Foucault, Power/Knowledge, 98.

9. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 342.